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American Race Relations Theory,
1894-1939**

RESEARCH REPORT

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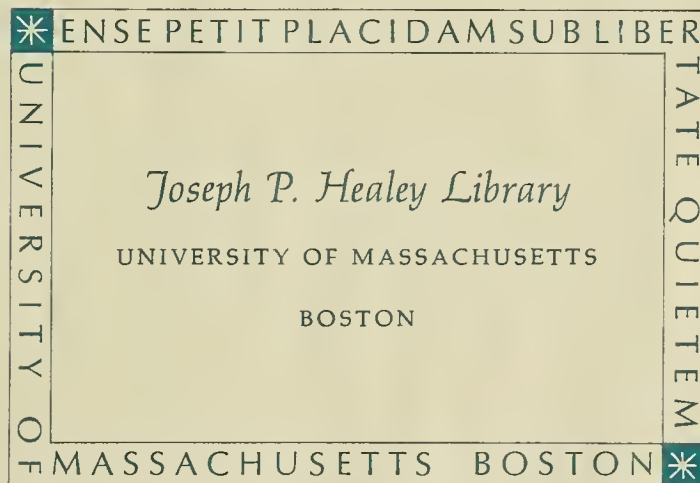
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**Race and Class in
American Race Relations Theory,
1894-1939**

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During the past decade social scientific discussions of the condition and destiny of African-Americans in the social order of the United States have been marred by assessments that are both conflicting and controversial. In none of the social sciences, however, has the controversy in regards to these issues been more acrimonious than in the field of race relations in the discipline of sociology.¹ For sociologists of American race relations, the major scholarly debate has centered around whether the United States is progressive with respect to its black population.

In 1978 William J. Wilson attempted to clarify the problem in *The Declining Significance of Race* by arguing that class rather than race was the most salient variable in race relations in contemporary America. Wilson declared unequivocally that "race declined in importance in the economic sector" during the post-World War II period, and that the "Negro class structure became more differentiated and black life chances became more increasingly a consequence of class affiliation" (1978, p. 153). For Wilson, in essence, the question of the progressiveness of the United States is dependent upon one's unit of analysis in the black class structure.

Wilson's arguments have proved to be extremely provocative and have generated trenchant criticism (Ringer, 1983, pp. 544-554; Pettingrew, 1980, pp. 19-21). Yet, it was not until the publication of Alphonso Pinkney's *The Myth of Black Progress* in 1984 that Wilson's argument for the saliency of class underwent rigorous empirical scrutiny. Pinkney's data suggest that Wilson's formulations were penned prematurely. Although Pinkney is convinced "that racism was on the decline in the 1960s and 1970s," he has found scant evidence for Wilson's belief in a decline of the importance of race in the economic sector. Pinkney's data indicate that the faltering United States economy during the late 1970s and early 1980s undermined earlier economic gains by blacks and distracted attention from the marginal position of blacks in the economy—an issue that had barely begun to be addressed during the late

1960s and early 1970s. On the basis of his investigation, Pinkney concluded that “race is still the critical variable” (1984, p. 97).

A third perspective, which is primarily theoretical and which concurs with Pinkney’s argument for the saliency of the race variable, was presented by Pierre van den Berghe in 1981. Van den Berghe’s *The Ethnic Phenomenon* is grounded in the theories of sociobiologists, which stress the “primordial” nature of ethnic and race relations. His book thus represents a conscious attempt to bring “the beasts back in” to sociological theory. In so doing, van den Berghe has constructed a pessimistic theory that suggests that ethnic and racial domination will always be with us. Unlike Pinkney, van den Berghe maintains that the condition and destiny of blacks in the United States are not amenable to political and economic solutions (1981, 1974, pp. 777-788).


The purpose of this essay is to identify the origins of the debate between Wilson and Pinkney. The period covered focuses on the years 1894 to 1939—from the publication of Franz Boas’s “Human Faculty as Determined by Race” in the *Proceedings* of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1894, to the publications of Robert E. Park’s “The Nature of Race Relations” in 1939. It is my argument that the parameters of the discussion regarding the progressiveness of race relations in the United States were defined during these years, and that all current theories are but extensions of or reactions against the theories formulated during the 50-year period that marked the formative years of American anthropology and sociology. This essay will be an endeavor in the field of the history of American race relations theory. As such, it will examine theories of black capabilities and the progress of leading social scientists as they have studied minority groups and race relations.

The current dispute over the saliency of class or race among students of race relations had its origins in the confrontation between nineteenth century raciology

and environmentalism in the 1890s. The idea of class differentiation within the black population emerged as a key theoretical concept in anthropology and sociology during these years—primarily because reform-minded scholars such as Franz Boas and W.E.B. Du Bois were intent on undermining the social scientific foundations of racism in their respective disciplines. In countering the stereotype of blacks as persons incapable of matching the intellectual, cultural, and economic achievements of middle-class Americans of British ancestry, Boas and Du Bois effectively challenged the racism and ethnocentrism that directly affected their lives in the cities and universities in which they lived and worked.

I

The first challenge to the racist orthodoxy that pervaded European and American social sciences came from anthropologist Franz Boas. Boas was born into a liberal Jewish household in Minden, Westphalia, in 1858. He attended several universities in his youth, earning his doctorate in physics at Kiel in 1881. After an uneventful year in the German army and two years of studying and waiting for a teaching position in the increasingly conservative academic community in Bismarck's Germany, Boas went to Baffinland to study the Eskimos and attempt to come to some understanding of the laws of human nature. Looking for a brighter future, he emigrated to the United States in 1883, but suffered tremendous setbacks in his attempts to secure employment in Anglo-Saxon dominated institutions. He was dismissed from a post as geographical editor of *Science*, forced to resign a position in physical anthropology at Clark University, and dismissed from a temporary position as chief assistant of anthropology at the World's Columbia Exposition in Chicago. To add insult to injury, William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, refused to offer him a professorship in 1894, citing Boas's inability to



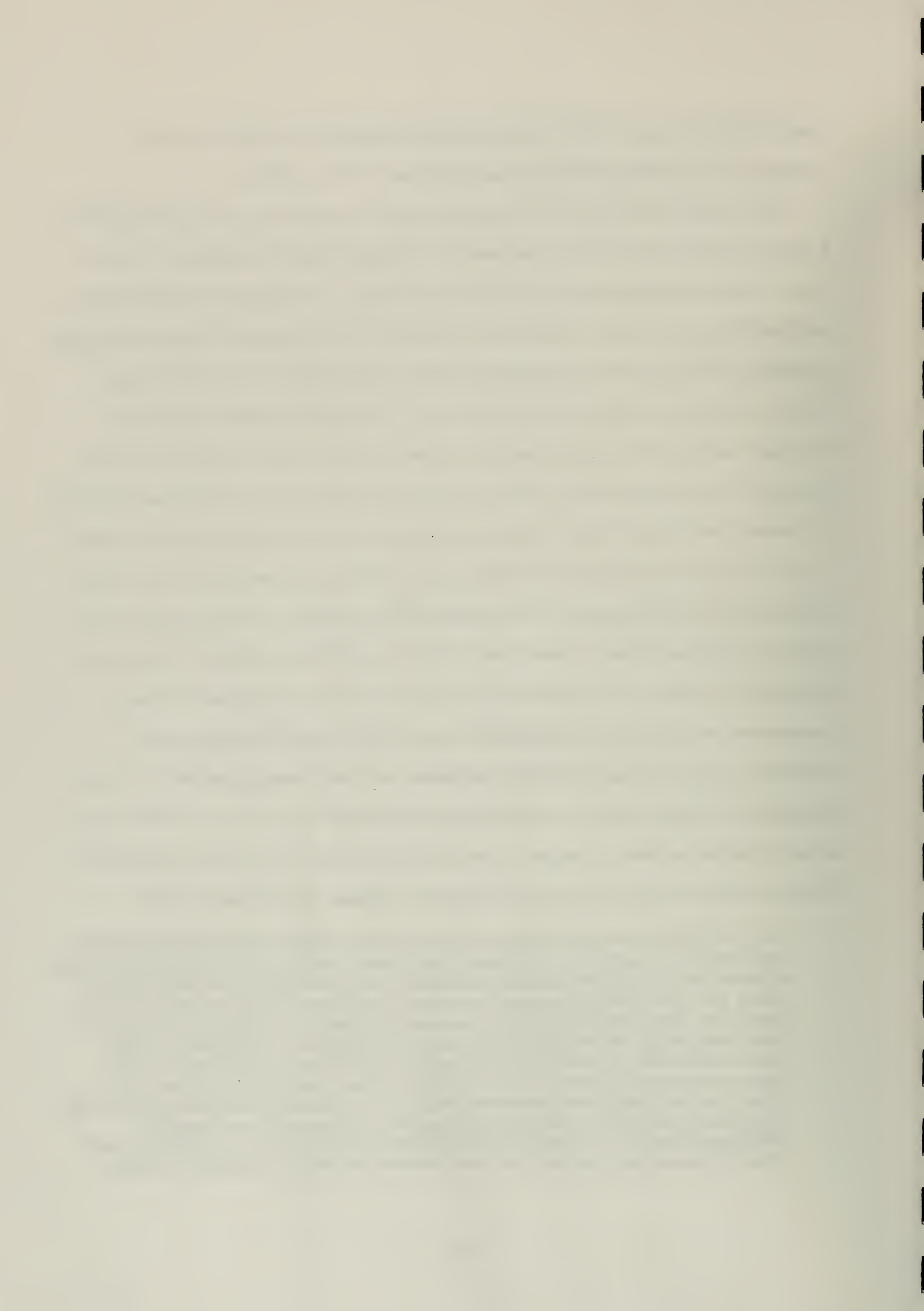
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“take direction” as one of the reasons behind his decision. In 1894, Boas was unemployed and delaying his creditors (Stocking, 1974, p. 219).²

In August 1894, Boas delivered an address to the section of anthropology of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in Brooklyn, New York. Boas’s leading student, George W. Stocking, Jr., has argued that the address, entitled “Human Faculty as Determined by Race,” was the genesis of arguments that appeared in *The Mind of Primitive Man* in 1911. Stocking points out that “one is struck by the limits of Boas’ critique in 1894 . . . [for he] had not achieved a fully developed notion of the cultural determination of behavior as an alternative to the prevailing racial determinism” (1974, p. 220). When Boas delivered “Human Faculty as Determined by Race” to the AAAS, the issues around the relative significance of “race” or “class” as determinants of the status of Afro-Americans were not manifest to American anthropologists. In the 1890s, leading American anthropologists such as Daniel Garrison Brinton, John Wesley Powell, and Frederic Ward Putnam were convinced that there was a pattern of cultural evolution, and thus posited that cultures evolved through the progressive stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. By assuming that their civilization was the most progressive, the major American anthropologists were white supremacists (Murphee, 1961, p. 226). Typical of the Victorian mindset in regard to the ability of blacks to achieve civilization were Daniel Garrison Brinton’s comments on blacks in *Races and Peoples* in 1890:

The low intellectual position of the Australfrican [black] race is revealed by the facts that in no part of the continent did its members devise the erection of walls of stone; that they domesticated no animal, and developed no important food-plant; that their religions never rose above fetishism, their governments above despotism, their marriage relations above polygamy. It is true that many of them practice agriculture and the pastoral life, but it is significant that the plants which they especially cultivate, the “durra” or sorghum, millet, rice, yams, manure, and tobacco, were introduced from Asia, Europe or America. The cattle and sheep are descended from the ancient stocks domesticated by the Egyptians, and differ from those represented on the early monuments of Assyria and India: The brick-built cities of the Sudan were constructed under Arab influence, and the ruins of stone towers and walls in the gold-bearing



districts of South Africa show clear traces of Semitic workmanship. (pp. 191-192)

According to Brinton, Africans were unable to achieve the stage of civilization primarily because of the limitations of their racial intellectual capabilities. He wrote in a posthumous work published in 1902: "The powerful monarchies which at times have been erected in that continent [Africa] over the dead bodies of myriads of victims have lasted but a generation or two. The natural limitations of the racial mind prevented it" (p. 71).

While Boas rose to challenge Brinton in 1894, Stocking speaks of the limits of Boas's critique of 1894, which he says are evident in Boas's discussion of Africa, his analysis of the physical characteristics of blacks, and his "men of high genius" hypothesis. When speaking of Africa, Boas was convinced that the Arabs were the "carriers of civilization" to the blacks of the Sudan. He wrote:

At an early time, principally between the second half of the eighth century and the eleventh century of our era, the Soudan was invaded by Hamitic tribes and Mohammedanism was spreading rapidly through the Sahara and the western Soudan. We see that, since that time, large empires were formed and disappeared again in struggles with neighboring states and that a relatively high degree of culture has been attained. The invaders intermarried with the natives, and the mixed races, some of which are almost purely negro, have risen high above the level of other African negroes. The history of Bornu is perhaps one of the best examples of this kind. (1894, p. 225)

Although Boas's emphasis on African empires was an important corrective of views prevailing in American anthropology, his emphasis on the "Hamitic" origins of those empires was a limiting perspective insofar as it suggested that the Hamites were, for the most part, responsible for the heights civilizations in the Sudan attained during those years before the sixteenth century.

When speaking of physical characteristics of blacks in "Human Faculty as Determined by Race," Boas clearly manifested the arrogance of white-skinned Europeans. His white chauvinism is obvious, for example, in the following passage:

[T]he face of the negro as compared to the skull is larger than that of the American, whose face is in turn larger than that of the white. The lower portion of the face assumes larger dimensions. The alveolar arch is pushed forward and thus gains an appearance which reminds us of the higher apes. There is no denying that this feature is a most constant character of the black races and that it represents a type slightly nearer the animal than the European type. The same may be said of the broadness and flatness of the nose of the negro and of the Mongal; but here again we must call to mind that prognathism and low, broad noses are not entirely absent from the white races, although the more strongly developed forms which are found among the negroes do not occur. The variations belonging to both races overlap. We find here at least a few indications which tend to show that the white race differs more from the higher apes than the negro. (1894, p. 230)

When turning to the subject of the size of the brain, Boas believed that it was the one anatomical feature that bore directly on the question of the difference in the mental faculty of whites and nonwhites. According to Boas, both the brain weights and cranial cavities of whites, on the average, were “larger than that of most other races, particularly larger than that of the negroes (p. 232). Nonetheless, Boas exercised considerable restraint in interpreting the data based solely on the relatively simple mathematical techniques of means, medians, and percentiles. He showed that the cranial cavities of blacks and whites overlapped, and inferred that: “We might, therefore, anticipate a lack of men of high genius [among the Negroes] but should not anticipate any lack of faculty among the great mass of negroes living among whites and enjoying the advantages of the leadership of the best men of that race (pp. 233-234).

Thus, despite Boas’s white supremacist attitude, he knew that whites determined the status of blacks in the American socioeconomic order—that it was white Americans’ attitudes and behavior that confined blacks to a low position. During the years from 1894 until 1915, Boas again and again identified the racial prejudice of white Americans as the primary determinant of the status of Afro-Americans. For instance, in 1894 he wrote:

When, finally, we consider the inferior position held by the negro race of the United States, who are in the closest contact with modern civilization, we must

not forget that the old race-feeling of the inferiority of the colored race is as potent as ever and is a formidable obstacle to its advance and progress, notwithstanding that schools and universities are open to them. We might rather wonder how much has been accomplished in a short period against heavy odds. It is hardly possible to say what would become of the negro if he were able to live with the whites on absolutely equal terms. (p. 226)

Fifteen years later Boas suggested that anthropology had demonstrated "that the impression which we gain from the failure of the American Negro to manifest himself in any of these directions [industry and art] is due, not to native inability, but to the degrading conditions under which he has been placed for generations" (1909, April, p. 225). And finally, in 1911, Boas argued that in the United States white racism was far more insidious than anti-Semitism. He wrote: "The Negro of our times carries even more heavily the burden of his racial descent than did the Jew of an earlier period; and the intellectual and moral qualities required to insure success to the Negro are infinitely greater than those demanded from the white, and will be greater, the stricter the segregation of the Negro community" (1911, p. viii).

Having identified white racial prejudice as the major obstacle to black progress as early as 1894, Boas was, nonetheless, unable to issue a prescription for the ills that adversely affected the condition of blacks. Of course, within the context of turn-of-the-century United States, this was no mean task. Part of Boas's problem stemmed from the fact that the Negrophobia that pervaded every aspect of the nation's life was a formidable obstacle to a rational discussion of the condition of Afro-Americans. Even more formidable, however, was the level of the discussion about the intellectual capabilities of Afro-Americans. It was that obstacle that Boas, because of his white supremacist beliefs, had the most difficulty surmounting.

Nevertheless, between 1894 and 1915, several factors compelled Boas to modify his views in regard to the capabilities of blacks. First, the increasing migration of blacks from the rural areas in the southeastern states to New York City stimulated Boas to take part in reformist activities centering around the condition of black

migrants. Second, his increasing involvement with black intellectuals and leaders compelled him to believe in the necessity of studying blacks scientifically. Third, his interpretation of African history gradually led him to conclude that the capabilities of the African ancestors of American blacks were the true indicators of the capabilities of the black race.

During the years 1890 to 1910, the black population of New York City almost tripled. In 1910 there were 91,709 blacks in Manhattan, Bronx, Queens, Richmond, and Brooklyn. Of that population 60,534 lived in Manhattan, while 22,708 lived in Brooklyn (Osofsky, 1963, pp. 17-18). "The average Negro migrant," Gilbert Osofsky wrote, "obviously found life harsh and difficult. For those who came, however, conditions in the North did offer a measure of self-respect and the possibility for future advancement that was generally denied the Negro in the South" (p. 34). Nonetheless, the net effect of the black migration was to initiate racial violence and antagonism and exacerbate the social problems brought about by urbanization.

Boas, who had obtained a position at Columbia University in 1896 and was tenured in 1899, joined with progressives such as Mary White Ovington, Victoria Earle Matthews, Frances A. Kellor, and William Lewis Bulkley to demonstrate his concern for the welfare of Afro-Americans. Boas and Mary White Ovington were members of the Greenwich House Committee on Social Investigation—an organization to which other members of the Columbia University faculty belonged. Even more importantly, Boas published his point of view in the social service magazine *Charities* in 1905, when that magazine devoted an entire issue to the migration of blacks and the subsequent social problems that had arisen as a result of that migration. He also penned an article for *The Crisis*, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in 1909.

However, it is obvious from the article that appeared in *Charities* in 1905, that Boas was still influenced by racial determinism. He wrote:

There is every reason to believe that the negro when given the facility and opportunity will be perfectly able to fill the duties of citizenship as well as his white neighbor. It may be that he will not produce as many great men as the white race, and his average achievement will not quite reach the level of the average achievement of the white race, but there will be endless numbers who will do better than the defectives whom we permit to drag down and retard the healthy children of our public schools. (p.86)

The above passage reflects the “Boasian paradox”—the contradiction between liberal sentiments and the racism of white supremacy that had been part and parcel of Boas’s thought since 1894. Insofar as Boas thought blacks would be able to fill the duties of citizenship as well as their white neighbors, he was making the case for the full participation of blacks in American life. Yet his formulation of the “approximate” intellectual equality of blacks and whites reflected both his progressive and reactionary values. To the extent that Boas was arguing for the necessity of taking into account individual differences in assessing a person’s capabilities—and therefore his or her intrinsic worth in the marketplace—he was making the case for differentiation in the black class structure. Nevertheless, by suggesting that blacks were only approximately equal to whites, Boas was implicitly approving of some discrimination in the economic sector.

As early as 1909, however, Boas had begun to minimize the significance of intellectual differences between blacks and whites. After reviewing the data on the size of the negro brain in a short article that appeared in *The Crisis*, Boas stated unequivocally that “The existing differences are differences in kind, not in value. This implies that the biological evidence also does not sustain the view, which is so often proposed, that the mental power of the one race is higher than that of the other, although their mental qualities show presumably differences analogous to the existing anatomical and physiological differences” (p. 23).

In 1911, Boas published *The Mind of Primitive Man*, which contained excerpts from his previously published essays on race. It contained the most up-to-date data

that supported most of the conclusions that Boas had been developing since 1894. It was complete in its refutation of crude racial determinist thinking; complete in its indictment of racial prejudice; and cogent in its presentation of the assimilationist arguments. Nevertheless, *The Mind of Primitive Man* did not mark the culmination of Boas's thought on blacks; that point was not reached until the publication of Boas's foreword to Mary White Ovington's *Half A Man* in 1911. There, he summed up the view of Boasian anthropology:

Many students of anthropology recognize that no proof can be given of any material inferiority of the Negro race; that without doubt the bulk of the individuals composing the race are equal in mental aptitude to the bulk of our own people; that, although their hereditary aptitudes may lie in slightly different directions, it is very improbable that the majority of individuals composing the white race should possess greater ability than the Negro race. (p. vii-viii)

Boas had, in essence, minimized the significance of purported intellectual differences between blacks and whites—insofar as he stressed the fact that the masses of both races were virtually equal. Nonetheless, he had also raised a key issue that would be far from being resolved at the time of his death in 1942: Were the slight differences in hereditary aptitude that he detected socially significant? In other words, what were the implications of slight differences in racial aptitudes for the professions and highly-skilled trades? Boas could not answer these questions; and they are moot even to this day.

II

We know for certain that Boas did not think blacks were incapable of making significant contributions to what was in his time the newly-formed discipline of anthropology. His commitment to diversifying the racial composition of the students of American anthropology was manifested as early as 1904. At that time, he

requested Booker T. Washington's advice concerning the admission of J.E. Aggrey to graduate study in anthropology at Columbia University. Boas wrote:

He [Aggrey] is a full-blood negro, and, so far as I can learn, his standing is such that he will require at least one year of undergraduate work before he can be admitted to university. . . . From what I hear from my colleagues who made his acquaintance at the session of the summer school, he is a very bright man. He is, however, without means, and will require support in order to complete his studies. I do not know whether it would be possible to obtain this support here in the city, but I do not think it is unlikely. (1904, November 30)

Despite Boas's enthusiasm for Aggrey's potential, Boas clearly labored when he considered the dismal career prospects that Aggrey would face once he had satisfactorily completed the requirements for an advanced degree. He continued:

I very much hesitate to advise the young man to take up this work, because I fear that it would be very difficult after he has completed his studies to find a place. On the other hand, it might perhaps be possible for him to study for two or three years and to take his degree of master of arts, and then to obtain a position in one of the higher schools established for his race. I feel that the matter is a rather delicate one, and I do not wish to advise the young man or to assist him in beginning a study which may ultimately put him in a most unfortunate position. (1904, November 30)

By the end of the letter, Boas was extremely pessimistic about the employment prospects of Aggrey and suggested they might be solved through Aggrey's participation in the Colonial service of one of the European powers:

It is of course evident that if he developed into a good scientist, he could do excellent work particularly in Africa, which would be of the greatest service to science. This is a consideration which makes me desirous of assisting him. On the other hand, I am very much afraid that it would be almost impossible to find a place for him even in this field. Perhaps by proper application, and if he were the right man, it might be possible to get him into Colonial service of one of the European countries that have colonies in Africa. (1904, November 30)

Booker T. Washington's response to Boas's letter is indicative of the fact that Boas's liberalism was far too progressive for the leading black spokesman of the period. Washington, who believed blacks needed to enter the practical vocations, told Boas:

Judging by what you state in your letter and knowing what I do, I can not rid myself of the feeling that the course which he is planning to take, will be of little value to him....At the present time I know of so many cases where young colored men and women would have done well had they thoroughly prepared themselves for teachers, some kind of work in the industries, or in the applied sciences, but instead, they have made the mistake of taking a course that had no practical bearing on the needs of the race; the result being they ended up as hotel-waiters or Pullman car porters. (1904, December 9)

As Boas would later learn, the Tuskegee “Wizard” was no man’s fool. Despite the fact that Aggrey eventually obtained an A.M. from Columbia University and went on to do work in Africa, Washington’s admonition rang true for many blacks, including Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston’s biographer, Robert E. Hemenway, has described how Boas did not hesitate to direct Hurston’s studies in 1934. But even Boas, who had helped Hurston draw up a plan for the Rosenwald Foundation for her doctoral program, was unable to gain long-term support for her—despite the fact that Hurston was the author of a novel and a book of folklore (Hemenway, 1977, pp. 206-214).

Boas’s relationship with the brilliant Afro-American leader W.E.B. Du Bois was far more productive. Du Bois initiated the relationship—which lasted for more than three decades—in 1905. On October 11 of that year, Du Bois sent Boas a letter informing him that Atlanta University was planning to conduct a study of the Negro physique for its next conference. In the letter Du Bois sought Boas’s expertise in identifying the best and latest works bearing on the anthropology of blacks—particularly their physical measurements, health, etc. In offering Boas the opportunity, Du Bois indicated that the Atlanta study would be a “great opportunity... for physical measurement of the Negro,” provided Columbia University would fund the project (1905, October 11).

In his reply to Du Bois on October 14, Boas indicated that he could not refer Du Bois “to anything that is particularly good on the physical anthropology of the Negro” (1905, October 14). He went on to suggest that he would query Columbia University

concerning the possibility of gaining funding for the study of the physical anthropology of blacks. Although Boas did not accept Du Bois invitation to the Atlanta University conference that year, he did go to Atlanta the following year to speak to an audience made up of black working people, preachers, and professionals (Du Bois, 1906, April 28).

Boas's correspondence with black leaders continued during the 1900s. On November 8, 1906, he wrote a letter to Booker T. Washington, asking to speak with him when he came to the Carl Schurz Memorial Meeting in New York City. Boas indicated that he was attempting to organize scientific work on blacks, which he believed would "be of great practical value in modifying the views of our people in regard to the Negro Problem." He noted that he was "particularly anxious to bring home to the American people the fact that the African race in its own continent [had]...achieved advancements which [were]...of importance in the development of civilization of the human race" (1906, November 8).

Washington did not respond to Boas's letter, but would extend an invitation to him in 1912 to serve on the executive committee of the International Conference on the Negro (1912, June 17). Washington's ghostwriters, Robert E. Park and Monroe N. Work, also made several references to Boas's work in the two-volume *The Story of the Negro* (1909); and, in a letter to T.E. Taylor on September 14, 1915, Washington referred to Boas as an expert on the issue of the inherent capabilities of blacks.

In the end, Boas's interpretation of African history led him to conclude that the achievements of Africans in their indigenous environment represented the true capacity of the black race. By 1904 Boas had written an article for *The Ethical Record* entitled, "What the Negro Has Done in Africa." In it Boas argued that it was unfair "to form a judgment of the whole [black] race by considering what it has done under trying conditions." Boas put forth that rather than gauge the abilities of blacks by the work they had accomplished as slaves and the advances they'd made

since freedom, whites "ought rather to look at the negro in his own home, and see what advances in culture he has made there." Boas pointed out that blacks in Africa had contributed more than any other race to the early development of the iron industry. Furthermore, he argued that blacks had developed strict methods of legal procedure and local trade, organized their communities, assimilated foreign cultures, and developed powerful states in the Sudan. "The achievements of the negro in Africa," he concluded, "therefore, justify us in maintaining that the race is capable of social and political achievements; that it will produce here, as it has done in Africa, its great men; and that it will contribute its part to the welfare of the community (1904, pp. 106-109).

The full implications of Boas's interpretation of the African past for Afro-Americans were evident in his Atlanta University commencement address, delivered on May 31, 1906. He began by suggesting that Afro-Americans who had imbibed the Washingtonian idea of self-criticism should certainly devote themselves to racial uplift: "If you did accept the view that the present weakness of the American Negro, his uncontrolled emotions, his lack of energy, are racially inherent, your work would still be a notable one. You, the more fortunate members of your race, would give your life to a great charitable work, to support the unsteady gait of your weak brother who is too feeble to walk by himself" (p. 311). Boas, however, did not want educated blacks to become pragmatic racial uplifters. Rather, he had a vision of them becoming "happy idealists" who, despite a "dim future," would seek fulfillment through responsibility (p. 316). These blacks, Boas believed, had "the full right to view [their] . . . labor in an entirely different light" (p. 311). Drawing on African history, Boas argued "that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron" (p. 311). After pointing to several "arts of life" for which black Africans were responsible, Boas concluded that educated Afro-Americans should be inspired to high achievements.

If, therefore, it is claimed that your race is doomed to economic inferiority, you may confidently look to the home of your ancestors and say, that you have set out to recover for the colored people the strength that was their own before they set foot on the shores of this continent. You may say that you go to work with bright hopes, and that you will not be discouraged by the slowness of your progress; for you have to recover not only what has been lost in transplanting the Negro race from its native soil to this continent, but you must reach higher levels than your ancestors had ever attained. (p. 313)

Commenting on Boas's address and its importance to his development as one of the leading American students of Africa, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1939:

I remember my own rather sudden awakening from the paralysis of this judgment [that Afro-Americans had no history] taught me in high school and in two of the world's great universities. Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching history in 1906 and said to a graduating class: "You need not be ashamed of your African past;" and then he recounted the history of the black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be consciously distorted. (p. vii)

After 1915 Boas would continue his efforts to dispel myths surrounding Afro-Americans and to demonstrate that white prejudice was the salient variable in American race relations. Much to his dismay, racism triumphed in the 1920s. Boas's career before 1915 in many ways represents both the strengths and limitations of the "American conscience" during the Progressive era. That conscience sought to reform white America's racial attitudes by developing sciences of culture and society. Unfortunately, as George M. Fredrickson has put it, "history in general does not . . . provide much basis for the notion that passionately held fallacies are destined to collapse because they are in conflict with empirical reality" (1988, p. 179).

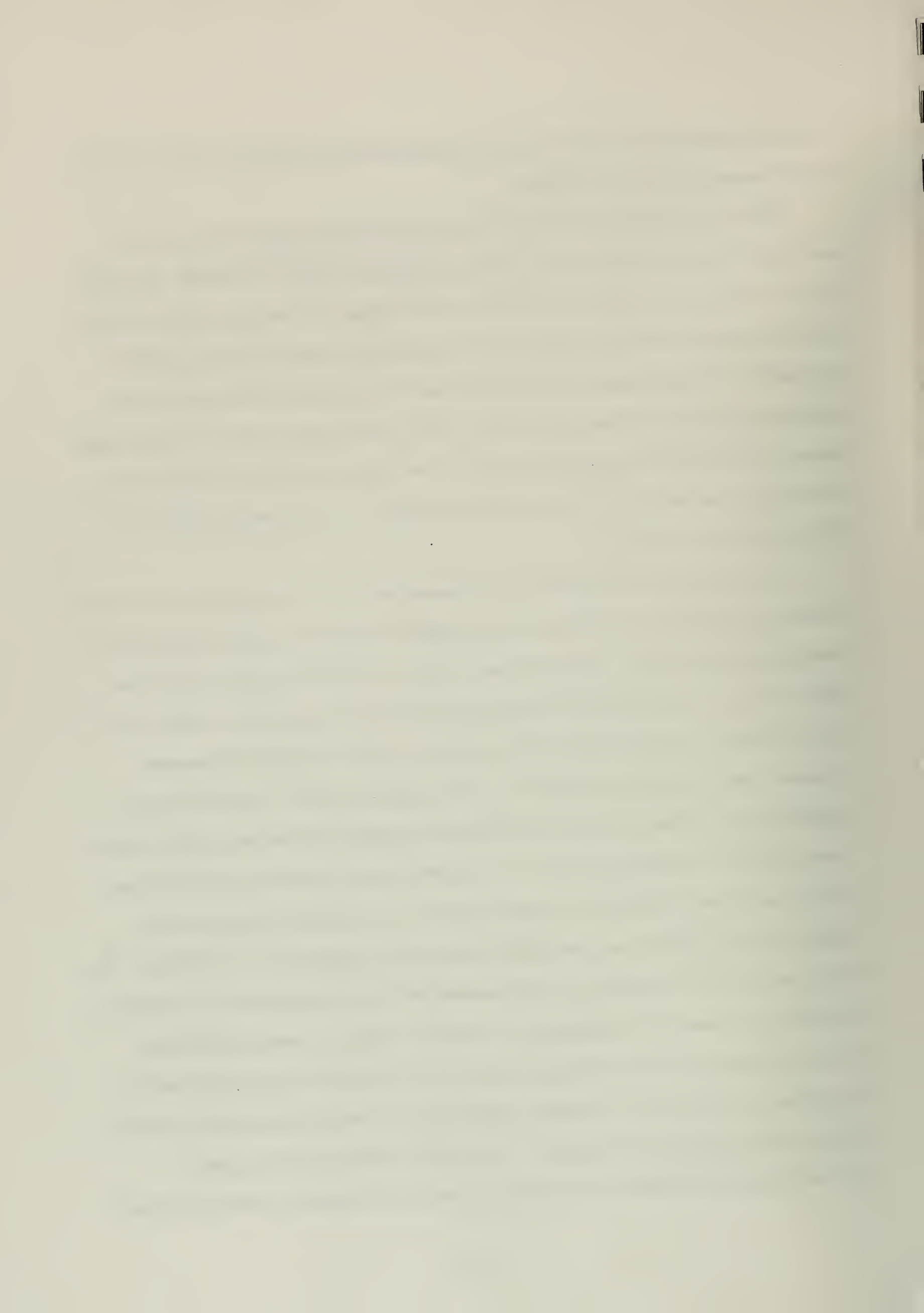
III

Like Franz Boas, W.E.B. Du Bois attempted to subvert the assumption that blacks were a homogeneous group whose members should occupy the same socioeconomic status. Where Boas issued a prescriptive statement, Du Bois was

uncovering empirical evidence and offering explanations for the stratification that existed among blacks in the 1890s.

The idea of an Afro-American class structure had its origins in American sociology at the turn-of-the century in the scholarship of W.E.B. Du Bois. The idea, which was a product of the clash between mainstream progressives and Darwinians, has persisted for almost a century as a key analytical concept in social scientific discussions of race relations in the United States. At present, it raises important questions about the relative significance of “race” and “class” as determinants of the status of Afro-Americans, and it is central to the arguments of such distinguished contemporary scholars as Alphonso Pinkney (1984), Thomas Sowell (1981), and William J. Wilson (1978).

Du Bois’s idea of an Afro-American class structure had its origins in his attempt to rebut the Darwinian prediction of the impending extinction of Afro-Americans as developed in Frederick L. Hoffman’s *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, which was published by the American Economic Association in 1896. In his book, Hoffman, who was a German-born employee of the Prudential Insurance Company, treated blacks as if they were a homogeneous group, concluding that the high death rate of blacks in the United States since the Civil War was attributable to “race traits and tendencies” rather than the adverse social conditions to which they had been subjected. To Du Bois, it was apparent that Hoffman did not have the insight to offer a “proper interpretation of apparently contradictory social facts.” Du Bois noted that “If, for instance, we find among American Negroes today, at the very same time, increasing intelligence and increasing crime, increasing wealth and disproportionate poverty, increasing religious and moral activity and high rate of illegitimacy in births, we can no more fasten upon the bad as typifying the general tendency than we can upon the good” (1897, pp. 127-133). Du Bois argued emphatically that Hoffman was incorrect in assuming that such contradictory facts



pertained to “the race” rather than to the class structure that had developed since emancipation. Du Bois, in other words, believed that the extent of black progress or retrogression was determined by the individual’s rank within the black class structure. At the same time, he was certain that white prejudice was an obvious obstacle to black progress.

Du Bois, whose orientation was a product of both his inferior status as an Afro-American in an Anglo-Saxon-dominated society and his academic training in the United States and Germany, anticipated the work of Robert E. Park and W. Lloyd Warner in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In his 1899 book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois gathered empirical data that suggested that class differentiation already existed in black America. He wrote: “wide variations in antecedents, wealth, intelligence and general efficiency have already been differentiated within this [Afro-American] group.” Despite his emphasis upon differentiation in Philadelphia’s major black community, Du Bois brought forth ample evidence suggesting that the attitudes and behavior of the white population “limited and circumscribed” the opportunities of even “the better classes” of blacks (1899, pp. 5-9).

IV

Although some sociologists (such as Jerome Dowd, Frank H. Hankins, Charles H. Cooley, Howard W. Odum, and Ulysses G. Weatherly) utilized racist explanations for the socioeconomic status of most blacks as late as the first decade of the 1900s, the rise of naturalism in post-1911 sociology generated internal conceptual stresses on the issue of racial capabilities and fostered an interest in the social structural changes that were perceptibly transforming the demographic character of the northern urban and industrial areas in which most sociologists lived and worked. There was, however, no monocausal relation between the rise of naturalism and the

decline of conservative racial views in sociology. Prior internal conceptual stresses, which were exacerbated by Boasian anthropology and psychological testing in the early 1900s, and contemporaneous social structural changes were *necessary* conditions for the development of progressive theories of race and race relations.

During the years 1910 to 1919, there were forces pushing and pulling blacks out of the South into urban-industrial areas in the North, where most sociologists taught. The push northward was a result of the oppressive and exploitative conditions in the South. In addition to the widespread legal and extralegal violence perpetrated against them, blacks also felt the brunt of extreme economic discrimination. Thus, the chief force pulling many blacks into the North was the shortage of unskilled labor there. Although the migration of blacks from the South to the North had increased steadily from 1870 through 1910, by 1915, when World War I began to impede the flow of cheap labor from Europe (many immigrants also returned to their homelands to take part in the conflict), larger numbers of blacks were recruited to take their place in northern industries. Even more blacks came north after 1917, when industries began expanding upon the United States' entry into the conflict. All told, the net increase in the black population in the North during the years 1910 to 1920 was 321,890. The effect of this migration was to begin the nationalization of the so-called "Negro problem," to precipitate black racial consciousness as manifested in the Garvey Movement, and to stimulate the development of progressive sociological theories by Afro-Americans on race and race relations.

As early as 1913, the *Annals* contained an issue that was devoted to the study of blacks. Entitled "The Negro's Progress in Fifty Years," the issue's contributors included black sociologists such as George E. Haynes, R.R. Wright, Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, Monroe N. Work, and Kelly Miller, and white Northern sociologists such as James P. Lichtenberger and Robert E. Park. In their articles the sociologists drew on empirical evidence to buttress their argument that blacks had made tremendous

progress since emancipation. Their empirical world view, in essence, reinforced their progressive evolutionist theory.

Black sociologists were especially fascinated by the progress brought about by the urbanization of blacks in both the North and South. For George E. Haynes, who had received his doctorate from Columbia University in 1912 and who would later teach economics and sociology at Fisk University, tremendous obstacles confronted blacks in the cities. Nonetheless, he argued that the "successes . . . in both industry and trade are multiplying and with substantial encouragement may change the rule to exception in the teeth of excessive handicaps." Haynes, who had worked for the National Urban League, went on to assert that "judging from the studies of Negro enterprises made in Philadelphia and in New York City and from widespread attendance upon the annual meetings of the National Negro Business League, substantial progress is triumphing over unusual obstacles" (1913, pp. 218-224).

The majority of blacks who were migrating to northern cities were unskilled laborers. Yet this did not daunt the optimism of the proponents of progress. R.R. Wright, Jr., an African Methodist Episcopal minister who had received his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania in 1912, expressed optimism concerning the prospects for black unskilled labor in the northern cities:

Unskilled Negro labor has invaded the Northern cities within the past fifty years, and while it has been with extreme difficulty that the skilled laborer has found a place, the Negro unskilled laborer has been a welcome guest. In nearly every large city, special employment agencies have been opened in order to induce Negro workers from the South to come North, where there is abundant public work to be done, on the streets, sewers, filter plants, subways, railroads, etc. Negro hodcarriers have almost driven whites out of business in some cities, while as teamsters, firemen and street cleaners, they are more and more in demand. In the hotel business, the Negro is in demand in the large cities, as waiter, bellman, etc., while the Negro women are more and more in demand as domestic servants. (1913, p. 114)

To Wright, the suggestion that the mass of black unskilled labor was stagnant was fallacious because of the "degree of respect given much unskilled work among

Negroes.” Instead, he argued that “this group of unskilled workers has shared something of the progress of the group” (p. 122). The idea that black progress was not restricted to unskilled labor and business was documented in W.E.B. Du Bois’s article, “The Negro in Literature and Art.” After surveying the achievements and progress blacks had made in literature and art, Du Bois pointed to discrimination in those vocations. He concluded: “So the sum of accomplishment is but an imperfect indication of what the Negro race is capable of in America and in the world” (1913, p. 233).

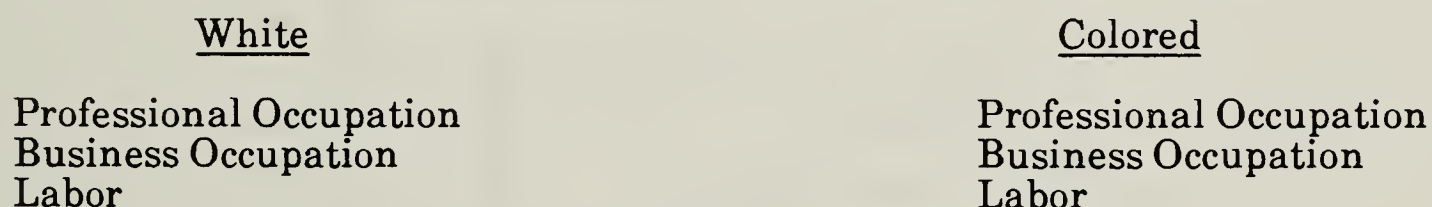
Robert E. Park tried to account for the improvement in the home life and the standard of living among blacks. Park drew distinctions between the different classes of blacks and insisted that, in order to understand “the social standards, the degree of culture and comfort which the Negro peasant, the Negro artisan, and business and professional man enjoy today,” one had “to take account of those earlier, ante-bellum conditions out of which they sprang.” For the vast majority of blacks, whose progenitors were fieldhands, conditions varied according to the locale in which they lived. Park described the homes of black peasants in southwestern Virginia and the Sea Islands of South Carolina as “comfortable”; while those in the up-country of Alabama were depicted as “rude huts.” Nonetheless, there was a group of black farmers in both the North and the South who achieved a high standard of living. Typical of that group was one farmer in Edwardsville, Kansas, who had recently erected a modern house that Park described as a “twenty-two room palace overlooking a 503 acre farm.” Typical of the black artisans, who were the descendants of the antebellum skilled workers, was a man who lived in what Park called “a neat five-room cottage,” which he owned. The black middle class, which was descended from free blacks and privileged slaves in Charleston, Baltimore, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York City, and New Orleans, lived in “comfortable” homes. Although Park admitted that in all large cities and in all small

towns in the South blacks lived “meanly and miserably,” he still believed that there was cause for optimism. “The Negro,” Park concluded, “has made great progress in many directions during the past half century, but nowhere more so than in his home, and nowhere, it may be added, do the fruits of education show to better advantage than in the home of the educated Negro” (1913, pp. 147-163).

Ironically, the concepts of black progress and class differentiation within the black population not only served the ideological needs of progressives, but also those of white southerners who were intent on perpetuating the caste-like system in their native region. Before 1915, southern whites such as Howard W. Odum argued that the existence of class differentiation in the black group indicated the possibilities of the fruition of a truly “separate but equal” society in the South. Visualizing what Park would later describe as a biracial organization of society, Odum concluded in *Social and Mental Traits of the Negro* in 1910 that: “The Negro has an unlimited field before him in the higher work of teaching, preaching, and professional work among his own people. There will be no competition there outside his own” (p. 29). Odum’s static views led him to argue that blacks and whites would never mix and mingle freely—primarily because the inherent abilities of blacks rendered them incapable of competing effectively with whites.

During the 1910s and 1920s this static view was modified. Robert E. Park, the erstwhile newspaper reporter and reformer, synthesized the ideas of reform-minded social scientists and southern scholars when he assumed his teaching post at the University of Chicago in 1913. Park concurred in the argument of the progressives—i.e., that there were no racial impediments that prevented the black population from producing a middle class whose size was proportionately equal to the size of the white middle class. But Park also believed the southern argument that blacks and whites could not compete in the same marketplace—primarily because he believed in the concept of an “instinctive” prejudice. “Race prejudice,” Park wrote in 1917, “may be

regarded as a spontaneous more or less instinctive defense reaction, the practical effect of which is to restrict free competition. Its importance as a social function is due to the fact that free competition, particularly between people with different standards of living, seems to be, if not the original source, at least the stimulus to which prejudice is the response” (p. xv). In a 1928 article in the *Annals*, Park characterized the change in race relations since emancipation in the following way. He suggested that while previously all whites held a socioeconomic status superior to blacks, race relations had developed to the point where there was both social and occupational differentiation, despite the persistence of a caste line that “maintained” social distances between blacks and whites. In diagrams, the former situation might look like this: ALL WHITE ; while the latter might look like:



“The races,” Park concluded, “no longer look up and down: they look across” (p. 20).

In regard to Park’s theory of black-white relations up until 1939, E. Franklin Frazier wrote in 1947 that it was “a static theory of race relations. His theory not only contained the fatalism inherent in Sumner’s concept of mores. His theory was originally based upon the assumption that races could not mix and mingle freely. This is apparent. . . in his concept of biracial organization” (p. 270).

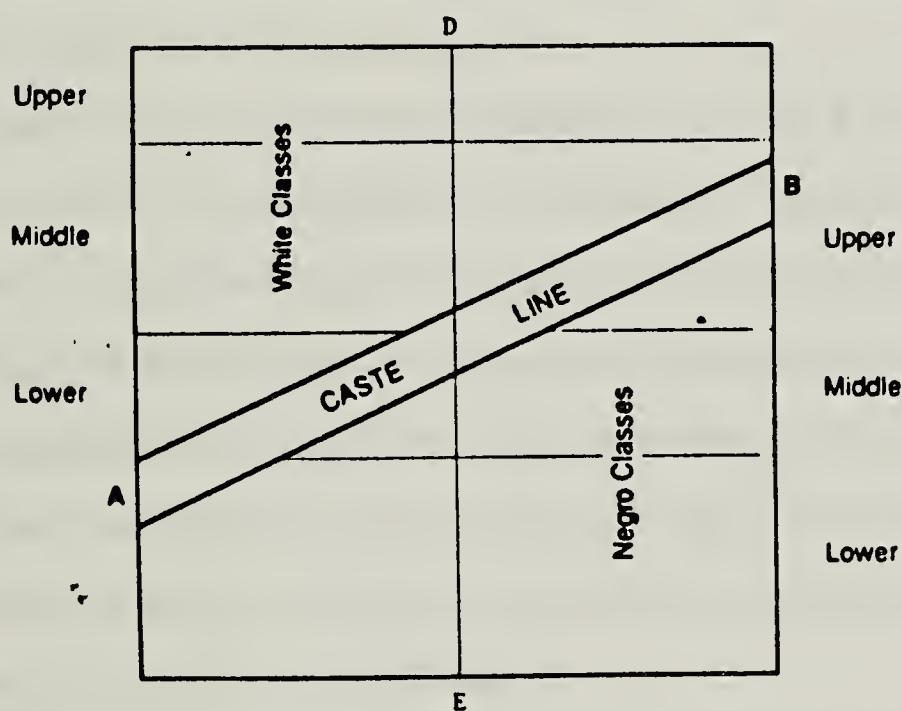
By 1939, however, Park had reformulated his theory. Impressed by social structural changes that affected the black population and by his experiences abroad,³ Park declared:

The same forces which brought about the diversity of races will inevitably bring about, in the long run, a diversity in the peoples in the modern world

corresponding to that which we have seen in the old. It is likely, however, that these diversities will be based in the future less on inheritance and race and rather more on culture and occupation. That means that race conflicts in the modern world, which is already or presently will be a single great society, will be more in the future confused with, and eventually superseded by, the conflicts of classes. (1950, p. 116)

Park's emphasis on the interaction between the class and race variables and his prediction concerning the eventual saliency of class in American race relations foreshadowed William J. Wilson's position.

The theory of W. Lloyd Warner and his associates, however, differed from that of Park. Formulated primarily on race relations in the Deep South, Warner represented race relations in the following manner:



Warner predicted that the caste line might possibly assume a vertical position (D, E). When and if that occurred, he believed that "the class situation in either group would not be fundamentally disturbed, except that the top Negro group would be equivalent with the top white, while the lower classes in each of the parallel groups would also be equivalent" (1936, p. 324). Warner, in essence, felt that the biracial organization that Park had diagrammed in 1928 might come into existence. For Warner, class was

an important aspect of race relations and would remain so in the foreseeable future. Yet, despite the possibility of economic parity, race would always be the salient variable in American race relations.

Conclusion

During the period 1894 to 1939 there were several important developments in race relations theory. First, during the years 1894 to 1911 Franz Boas attempted to free race relations theory from the racist assumptions of nineteenth-century social science. Once Boas had established that white prejudice, not assumed innate racial traits, was the major obstacle to black progress, it became exceedingly difficult to rationalize the caste-like system in the United States which was based on the assumed congenital inferiority of Afro-Americans.

While Boas was issuing a prescriptive statement—i.e., that a just society should approximate an even distribution of blacks and whites in all classes in the American social order—Du Bois was uncovering evidence that blacks were already a heterogeneous group. Du Bois, like Boas, viewed white prejudice as an obvious obstacle to black progress; yet he qualified the latter's position. Insofar as he believed historical antecedents and individual enterprise were factors to be considered, he argued that the degree of progress that some blacks were making at the turn-of-the-century was determined by their class affiliation.

The work of Du Bois and Boas coincided historically with the social structural changes that pushed blacks out of the South into the urban-industrial North, creating an even more heterogeneous black population there. This progress after 1911 compelled sociologists such as Robert E. Park to believe that the racial conflicts in the North were a direct product of that progress and that white prejudice would continue to remain an obstacle to black progress. By 1939, however, Park believed that prejudice could not alter the inexorable movement towards an assimilated

society where the issues of race and class would increasingly become confused. Park's vision, however, conflicted with that of W. Lloyd Warner. Warner, who believed that there were structural impediments to the fruition of an assimilated society, preached a pessimistic philosophy that suggested that racism would remain a salient variable in American race relations. Although Warner's arguments were buried underneath the onslaught of the assimilationists until the 1960s, his dismal prophecies concerning the persistence of caste-like barriers in the American social order seem plausible in these days of racial conflict. However, it should be remembered that, as Alphonso Pinkney clearly recognizes, a belief in the permanence of caste in American life, to some extent, serves to rationalize a *laissez-faire* approach to circumstances that are subject to the intervention of the human will.

Notes

1. During the past decade the discipline of psychology has witnessed increasing conflict over the question of the validity of IQ tests. See Taylor, H.F. (1980). *The IQ Game*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Jensen, A. (1980). *Bias in Mental Testing*. New York: Free Press; Eckberg, D.L. (1979). *Intelligence and Race*. New York: Praeger; and Kamin, L.J. (1974). *The Science and Politics of IQ*. Potomac, MD: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. The major clash in sociology has arisen between Wilson, W.J. (1978). *The Declining Significance of Race*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Pinkney, A. (1984). *The Myth of Black Progress*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
2. See also the numerous letters dealing with finances in the Boas papers for the years 1894-1896.
3. For biographical information, see Matthews, F.H. (1977). *Quest for an American Sociology*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press; and Raushenbush, W. (1979). *Robert E. Park*. Durham, NC: Duke University.

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